They ate first, since they could not take the perishable rations with them. Spock countered the Speaker's impatience with a Vulcan refusal to be hurried. Two of their number had the voracious metabolisms of heavy-G planets and he had to restore his own resources. T'serek sat where he was, the water beading on his skin, his feet still in the river, eating as ordered. Spock, moving stiffly but on his feet was studying the striated patterns of the canyon wall. Only Craven and the Ixmahx seemed tense. Nadia had a sudden sense of deja vu a nostalgia for the picnics of her youth, and she realized that it was generated by Dray T'serek, kicking his feet in the water, totally relaxed, with water dripping down his neck. She realized for the first time how young he was. Imminent destruction might be hanging over them, but for the moment, he was enjoying himself. He had been able to take action, and Spock seemed well again.

The dunking and disorientation were unpleasant, but once inside they had lights, and it was degrees warmer than in the outside air. Hillis brought up the rear this time, after shoving the raft downstream. At first it was no more unpleasant than any other walk in the dark, but there should be neither wind nor sound underground, and there were both--stray drafts of bad air, and long pipe-organ protests that they both heard and felt. They were walking in and beside the river in the beginning, but after a while they began to climb. Goren did not always seem sure of the way, and the coldlight torches cast strange shadows on the dark walls. Sunderson stumbled once, and flinched away from the wall with a bleeding palm. The rough rock was as abrasive as emery. It was hard to guess how much time had passed when T'serek asked for a halt. Nadia doubted that his animal energy had been depleted by the stroll, but she was more than glad to sit down, and glad he was keeping a close eye on Spock.

They put the light in the center of their group and it lit their faces from underneath. Craven sat with his back to the solid stone, and his eyes searched the dark restlessly. The earth under them shuddered and vibrated with sound, and he drew the back of his hand across his forehead. Both he and the Ixmahx were sweating, and while it was warm, it wasn't that warm. Sunderson only had eyes for T'serek, and Clement was sulking with his chin on his knees, but Spock and the other two men had noticed the gesture. Hillis butted a shoulder up against Craven's in rough comfort.

"What is your psi profile, Mr. Craven?" It was Spock, as usual, who cut to the heart of the issue.

The security man looked up. "I'm sorry, sir?"

"Your psi ratings. I cannot recall them in the personnel files."

Craven wiped his face again and scrubbed his hands down the sides of his legs. He hesitated, then licked his lips. "I'm pretty high in precog--when it pertains to fires and explosions. I'm not always right--though--and they always told me not to pay too much attention to it." He glanced up at Dray. "I'm not just scared, sir. It's--hard for me to get too close to explosives."

Dray looked puzzled. "What are you feeling now?"

"That there's going to be a blast, a big one. In a few hours all this is going to be full of fire. We're going toward the source."

"Is this certain?" asked the Speaker.

Craven shook his head a little stiffly. "I'm never sure, sir. Usually I just keep clear--"

"You also seem stressed, Speaker," said Spock.

"Yes. I feel the Wielda. And it would prefer to have me as host rather than the other." Very soberly the Ixmahx looked from face to face. "If it did possess me, it would have access to all I know. I do not intend that to happen."

The ground shook again, and Hillis, with no undue concern, asked "What makes it do that?"

"I thought you understood," said the Speaker. "The Throat of Fire is a volcano."

Hillis looked nonplussed. "Do they do that when they're extinct?"

Clement looked up then. "Don't they teach you anything? We've been analyzing this world for two weeks. There aren't any extinct volcanoes on it."

The security man shrugged off the aggravating tone. "I just asked. I've never been in any volcano before."

"If you are rested," said Spock, terminating the discussion, "we will go on."

After that it seemed that the heat was worse, although Nadia told herself it was imagination. The dark began to be oppressive. It was exhausting to march on and on without coming to anything different. They had nothing to steer by but the Speaker's sensations, and although he didn't mention it again, his fear was palpable. Nadia could feel him pushing himself forward, could feel the effort Craven was making to control himself. They stumbled through places where the air was so bad that it made her head reel. Sometimes there was steam in the air, and once they had to edge along a row of fumaroles on a six inch ledge. The straining of the earth continued, and sometimes the sound of their own feet came back magnified and delayed by echo until they thought someone was following them. In all that time there was only the light of the small hand held torches, and twice Spock gave the order to extinguish them entirely while they stood in the dark and listened.

They went down, crossing tongues of tumbled rubble and rock that spilled across their path. The rough rock was warm to the touch now, and the air was increasingly humid. Water seeped from the walls and trickled under their feet and they began to hear a continuing rush and roar that drowned other sounds, beating through the tunnels and corridors, seemingly from all directions. Abruptly Goren halted, and played the light forward. Their path ended abruptly in a sheer cliff, but a span of dark stone arched out, beyond the beam of light, and spray wreathed it, glittering in the light. T'serek stepped forward too, turning his torch to left and right. Falling water reflected the light like obsidian and the roar localized itself far below them. They could not see if the narrow bridge descended again on the other side or not. The Guthrie put an experimental foot forward.

"One moment," said Spock. "Speaker, are you sure that the artifact is before us?"

The Ixmahx put the heels of his hands to the boney ridges over his eyes. "I am nearly certain, First Officer. That is the direction I most fear to go."

Spock only debated for a moment. Goren was the only guide they had. "Very well. T'serek, see